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Submitted photo

EBERTFEST: Roger Ebert, left, and his wife, Chaz, open the 14th annual Ebertfest: Roger Ebert's Film Festival on April 25, 2012 at the Virginia Theatre in Champaign, Ill.

Thumbs up for Ebertfest

Now in its 16th year, Roger Ebert's film festival lives on

By Rob Burgess
Tribune night editor

When Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert died April 4, 2013 at age 70 after a years-long battle with cancer, he left behind a vibrant legacy. The Urbana, Ill. native inspired countless other critics and

boasted a fan base of millions of fellow movie lovers around the world. Now, a year after his passing, a vital strand of that heritage, Ebertfest: Roger Ebert's Film Festival, kicks off its 16th year tonight at the historic, 1,500-seat Virginia Theatre in Champaign, Ill.

"Ebertfest draws perfect audiences," wrote Ebert in his blog May 1, 2012.

"They [are] always in tune."

The festival, which runs through Sunday, is set to begin at 7:30 p.m. with a screening of "Life Itself," a documentary on Ebert's life which premiered in January at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.

"The documentary concentrates really on Roger's years in Chicago: his years as a newspaperman at the Sun-Times, his relationship with [late 'At The Movies' television partner and Chicago Tribune film critic] Gene Siskel and his meeting his wife, Chaz," said Dr. Nathaniel Kohn, festival director and co-founder. "I've seen it and it's an extraordinary piece of work."

As is now tradition, each of this year's 12 Ebertfest films will feature a panel discussion with those involved in their production including: Steve James (director, "Life Itself"); Oliver Stone (director, "Born on the Fourth of July"); Bennett Miller (director, "Capote"); Spike Lee (director, "Do the Right Thing"); Jem Cohen, director ("Museum Hours"); Brie Larson and Keith Stanfield, actors ("Short Term 12"); Haifaa Al-Mansour, director ("Wadjda"); Ann Hui, director ("A Simple Life"); and Ramin Bahrani,

director ("Goodbye Solo"). Kohn will screen "Bayou Maharajah," which he produced, at noon Sunday along with Lily Keber, director; Henry Butler, musician; and Tim Watson, editor.

"Those discussions are really in-depth explorations of the film," said Kohn, who is also an associate professor at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, and serves as associate director of the George Foster Peabody Awards. "We open it up to questions from the audience for about the last 20 minutes or half hour of that."

The Alloy Orchestra of Cambridge, Mass. will help fulfill another festival staple at 1 p.m. Friday as it plays musical accompaniment to a silent film, this year is 1924's "He Who Gets Slapped."

Patton Oswalt was scheduled to appear at the 2012 festival to help Robert Seigel, director, present "Big Fan" — the 2009 film in which he starred — and the 1949 movie "Kind Hearts and Coronets," but was unable to due to filming conflicts.

"Roger, if you and Ebertfest will take a chance on me ... I will task my agents and managers to keep those days sacred, and not try to pull off the last-minute, no-sleep derring-do we tried and failed to do this year," wrote Oswalt on his website April 25, 2012.

The following day, Ebert commended Oswalt for his forthrightness.

“Patton Oswalt can't come to Ebertfest,” Ebert wrote on Twitter April 26, 2012. “But he is transcendently graceful about explaining why not. This is a nice man.”

True to his word, Oswalt presented a free student screening of the original 1974 version of “The Taking of Pelham One Two Three” Tuesday night at the Foellinger Auditorium on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. And at 9 p.m. Thursday he will show “Young Adult,” the 2011 film in which he starred, at the Virginia Theatre.

Ebertfest – originally called Roger Ebert’s Overlooked Film Festival – is organized by the university’s College of Media. A 1997 festival at the school called Cyberfest provided the impetus for Ebertfest. The occasion was an Ebert-hosted screening of Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film, “2001: A Space Odyssey” on the supposed “birthday” of the film’s infamous HAL 9000 computer. (Which was supposedly Jan. 12, 1997 in Urbana, Ill.) The discussions surrounding the projection of the film in its original, 70mm format led organizers to the Virginia Theatre.

“We [then] started talking about doing a festival,” said Kohn.

Kohn said unlike other film festivals, Ebertfest does not accept submissions. Instead, each year, Roger – with the help of Kohn and Chaz Ebert – would discuss potential entrants. Kohn said Roger would then devise a list of 20 or 30 possible films, which he would then cut down to 12.

"We still have the list of films we were talking about when Roger was alive," said Kohn. "We got several films this year from that. The basic criteria was to show films that we thought deserved a second look. ... So, we're still following those general guidelines that were established by Roger."

A life-sized statue of Ebert will be unveiled at noon Thursday in front of the Virginia Theatre. Kohn said Ebert's life's work will continue to flourish for years to come.

"We're in the process of establishing a Roger Ebert Center for Film Studies," he said. "The festival will then become part of that center. We expect it will continue in its present form for a long time to come."

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If you go:

[Editor's note: Though all festival badges and tickets for most of the Ebertfest screenings at the Virginia Theatre -- 203 W. Park Ave., Champaign, Ill. -- are sold out, there are still a few tickets left for select screenings. "If you want to see a film that is sold out, go to the Virginia Theatre Box Office 30 minutes before screening time and wait in the rush ticket line," according to the Ebertfest website. "Shortly before the film begins, any empty seats will be sold on a first-come first-served basis. At

every festival since 2002, all patrons waiting in line for tickets for sold out films were able to get in." Tickets are \$14 for each screening; and \$12 for students and seniors. Each screening also includes a panel discussion with those involved with the film's production. For more information, call the Virginia Theatre at 217-356-9063.]

Today

7:30 p.m. - "Life Itself" (Steve James, director)

Thursday

Noon - Unveiling of Roger Ebert statue in front of the Virginia Theatre.

1 p.m. - "Museum Hours" (Jem Cohen, director)

4 p.m. - "Short Term 12" (Brie Larson, actor; Keith Stanfield, actor)

9 p.m. - "Young Adult" (Patton Oswalt, actor)

Friday

1 p.m. - "He Who Gets Slapped" (silent film accompanied by the Alloy Orchestra)

4 p.m. - "Capote" (Bennett Miller, director)

8:30 p.m. - "Do the Right Thing" (Spike Lee, director)

Saturday

11 a.m. - "Wadjda" (Haifaa Al-Mansour, director)

2 p.m. - "A Simple Life" (Ann Hui, director)

5 p.m. - "Goodbye Solo" (Ramin Bahrani, director)

9 p.m. - "Born on the Fourth of July" (Oliver Stone, director)

Sunday

Noon - "Bayou Maharajah" (Lily Keber, director; Nate Kohn, producer;
Henry Butler, musician; Tim Watson, editor)